West Coast Story

By George Nicholson

CLAYOQUOT

CLAYOQUOT SOUND, on the West Coast of Vancouver Island, is almost as closely associated with the early history of British Columbia as Nootka. The name is derived from "Tla-o" or "Cla-o," meaning another, or different; "aht" means people or village.

There is a tradition that the inhabitants here were originally quiet and peaceful, but later became quarrelsome and treacherous; hence they were called by their neighbors "Cla-o-quahts."

Different traders dating from 1785 spelt it Clioquatt, Clayocuat, Klooquat and Klaoquaht. To this day, the name is seldom pronounced correctly.

The number of Indians residing in the sound in 1788 is estimated at 4,000; now the number is reduced to about 1,000, divided between the villages of Ahousat and Opitsat.

In 1787, Captain Barkley of the Imperial Eagle, named it Wickaninnish Sound, after the hereditary name of the principal chief residing there. It was named Clayoquot Sound by Captain Richards, HMS Hecate, who surveyed these waters in 1861.

Its three principal arms are Tofino Inlet, Bedwell Sound and Herbert Inlet, which vary in length from 15 to 20 miles and are connected by navigable passages. In the middle of the sound is Meares Island, also named by Richards after John Meares, that British naval officer who afterwards engaged in trading between this coast and China. It will be remembered that at Nootka, in 1789, Meares had three of his ships seized by the Spaniards and taken to Monteray. They were subsequently released, but the incident almost led to war between England and Spain.

At the close of 1791, the American vessel Columbia, Captain Gray (Grays Harbor, Ore.) wintered in Clayoquot Sound. On Meares Island, to protect his crew against the Indians, Gray built a fort. He also built a small schooner named the Adventure, the second vessel to be built on the west coast of North America, north of Mexico. The first, the Northwest America, was built by Meares at Nootka in 1788.

In the spring of 1792, Gray proceeded southward in the Columbia and discovered the large river which he named after his ship. The Adventure went from Clayoquot to the Queen Charlotte Islands in charge of Mr. Haswell, the Columbia's mate, and was subsequently sold to Quadra for 70 choice sea otter skins.

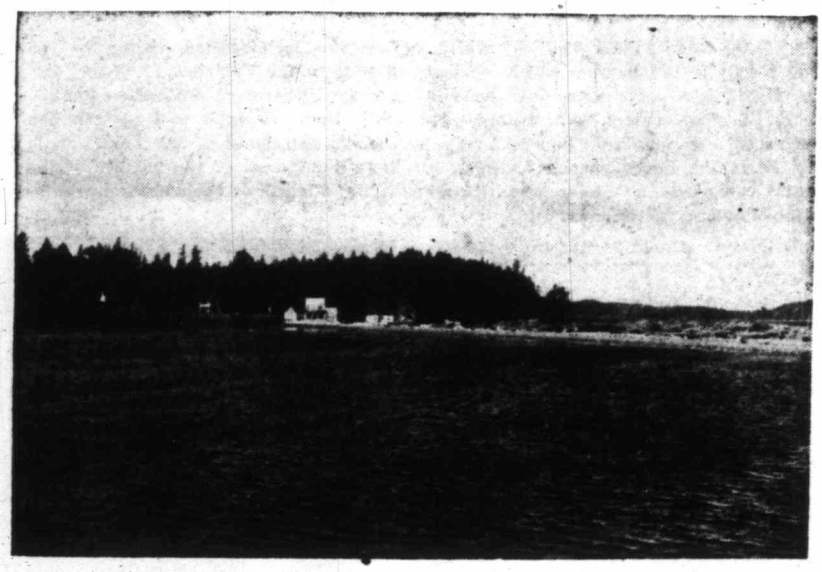
Flores Island, which forms the western boundary of the sound, was named in 1791 by Lieutenant Eliza, after Don Manuel Antonio Flores, Knight of the Order of Calatrava, Viceroy of Mexico, 1787-1789. It was Flores, who, in February, 1789, despatched the expedition, under the command of Lieutenant Estevan Jose Martinez (the man Estevan Point was named after) to Nootka, which led to the dispute between Great Britain and Spain regarding their respective rights on this northwest coast.

Ahousat (proper name, Mak-to-sis), an Indian village inhabited by the Ah-ous-aht tribe, which at present numbers about 400, is on Matilda Inlet, at the southeast end of Flores Island. The Indian meaning of the word Ah-ous-aht is "people living with their backs to the land and mountains," because their original home was on the outside shores. Mak-to-sis, where their village is now, was once their principal burying grounds. The word is derived from "Mak-yak-sats" a coffin, or "Mak-yak-wilt," to bury.

Matilda Inlet (originally known as a creek) was named by Richards after the British schooner Matilda, engaged in trading along this coast in 1862 and later. It was here in August, 1864, that the sloop Kingfisher, 10 tons, Captain James Stevenson, was attacked by a party of Ahousat Indians, Chief Cap-chah and 12 men. All on board were murdered, their bodies mutilated and thrown into the sea. The vessel was afterwards pillaged and burned.

News of the outrage arrived, by canoe, at Victoria, on Sept. 10. Early in October, HMS Sutlej, with Rear Admiral Hon. Joseph Denman (Denman Island), commander-in-chief Pacific station, 1864-1865, and Mrs. Denman, on board, arrived from Esquimalt, accompanied by HMS Devastation, to capture and punish the murderers.

In those days the Ahousats had several villages. These were shelled and many houses and canoes destroyed. A number of Indians, said to be 15 and including three of the murderers, were killed. Several prisoners were brought to Victoria, but all were acquitted. Chief Cap-chah was never captured. Shells fired by the Sutlej and Devastation on this expedition still are found buried where the old villages stood. One, which came into the possesion of the writer, was recently donated to the Esquimalt Maritime museum.



Clayoquot, where the first trading post on Vancouver Island's West Coast was established.

There is also a small white settlement at Ahousat, comprising about six families. It was here that the Gibson family was brought up and where they got their start in the lumber business. Gordon Gibson, former MLA for Lillooet, and his three brothers, Clarke, Earson and Jack, one-time MP for Comox-Alberni, are now millionaires. All reside at Vancouver.

Lennard Island lighthouse, established in 1904, guards the main entrance to Clayoquot Sound. Village Island is immediately on the port side, going in. It was here, in 1911, that the Indians attacked the Boston ship Tonquin and killed Captain Jonathan Thorn, together with all but five of his crew, and an Indian interpretor who had joined the ship before she left the Columbia River. These six men managed to drive the attackers overboard.

The facts of the tragedy were never fully revealed. Sketchy details were supplied months later by the interpretor, who was taken ashore the following day by the Clayoquots and subsequently found his way back to Astoria.

That night, the other survivors, with the exception of one man who was badly injured, escaped in one of the ship's boats; but they were ultimately captured and killed. The Indians thereupon crowded on board the apparently deserted ship, when suddenly there was a terrific explosion. It is believed that the man left on board, when the deck became full of Indians, touched off the vessel's powder supply and blew her up, with himself and his enemies.

The blowing up of the Tonquin was long remembered in and around Clayoquot Sound. Writing about it in his diary, Father Brabant recollects how the Old Indians spoke of the disaster in terms of awe. They told him that after the explosion the bay was strewn with blankets, which because of their excellence, were long afterwards greatly treasured. They were looked upon as different and superior to all others, and spoken of as "Claokwahitske."

Wickaninnish, the hereditary chief of the Clayoquots, who was almost as famous and feared as Maquinna, the chief of the Nootkas, has an island and a bay named after him. Wickaninnish Island, which adjoins Village Island, and Wickaninnish Bay, which is actually Long Beach. The latter was formerly known as Long Bay, but the name was changed in 1930 by the Canadian Hydrographic Survey Board.

To the west of Wickaninnish Island, is Vargas Island, the third largest on the sound. It was named by Commanders Galiano and Valdez, after the noted Spanish governor of that name who re-conquered the province of New Mexico in 1693. Shortly before the First Great War, about 20 British immigrants settled on this Island, but at the outbreak of hostilities, the majority of the menfolk enlisted. The few that returned subsequently found that the land was unsuitable for farming. Now, a handful of Indians, in the village of Kilsomat, are the Island's only inhabitants.

Tofino, an organized village municipality with a population of about 500, mostly fishermen and loggers, is the largest settlement on the sound. It was named after the inlet, which in turn was named by the Spaniards, Galiano and Valdez, who, in the vessels Sutil and Mexicano, explored this coast in 1792. This will be the end of a road now being built from Alberni, which is officially designated as the western terminus of the Trans-Canada Highway. It is expected to be completed by August.

On Stubbs Island, across the bay from Tofino, is Clayoquot, the oldest white settlement on the West Coast. It was named after Captain Napoleon Fitz Stubbs of the North Gloustestershire Regiment, who came out to this coast in the merchant ship Athelstan in 1860. This was the site of the West Coast's first trading store. The Indians were not permitted in the building. Instead, they had to make their purchases (mostly in trade) by means of a small wicket. Handy to the wicket, the storekeeper kept a loaded rifle. Stubbs Island is completely surrounded by sandy beaches, and for that reason, Clayoquot has always been a popular resort. There is a hotel there.

On the shores of Meares Island and facing Tofino, is the Indian village of Opitsat, the principal home of the Clayoquots, present population about 300. Also on the shores of Meares Island, at the foot of Lone Cove Mountain, one of the sound's most prominent landmarks, is Christie Indian Residential School. A Roman Catholic institution, which can accommodate 150 boarders, it was established in 1899 by the Right Rev. A. Christie, Bishop of Victoria. Kakawis, the name of the locality and its post office, means "many berries."

On Nov. 23, 1915, the Chilean ship Carelmapu was wrecked near the entrance to Clayoquot Sound. Only five of her crew of 24 survived. The steamer Princess Maquinna made a valiant attempt to save her.

The trading schooner Alpha, 58 tons, built at Nanaimo in 1859, the first vessel constructed there, was wrecked on Flores Island Nov. 27, 1868, during a southeast gale. She had sailed from Victoria, bound for Honolulu with lumber. Nothing was saved but a few blankets and a little flour, and, after spending nine days on the Island, the crew induced the Indians to take them to Alberni, whence they walked to Nanaimo by the old Indian trail.